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PERPETUATION OF RACISM  
THROUGH URBAN PLANNING IN THE  
UNITED STATES

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## Introduction

The American cities that were once revered with opulence are now shadows of that former glory. Since the beginning of the 20th Century, American cities started to change due to a multitude of factors. These factors have completely changed the social fabric of cities. However, they mainly disproportionately affected people of color's (POC) communities in the United States. Over a century later, we can see the consequences of decisions made by urban planners. These decisions have protected white Americans while disenfranchising POC communities. This paper will investigate how a multitude of urban planning decisions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has perpetually excluded POC communities in the Bronx of New York City.

## Overview of the Bronx

The Bronx is the Northernmost borough in New York City and seen as a border separating Upstate New York. It borders Manhattan and Brooklyn by the Harlem and East River respectively. Today its majority African American and Hispanic communities accounting for 85% of the population (Statistical Atlas). Despite making the majority, these communities are the poorest in the Bronx: with African American households making \$37.9K median and Hispanics making \$29.5K (Statistical Atlas). These communities make disproportionately less than White communities, who make on median \$57.5K despite making up ~10% of the population (Statistical Atlas). Thus, there is inequality among these communities, especially considering the poverty line, which in the United States is \$27,750.

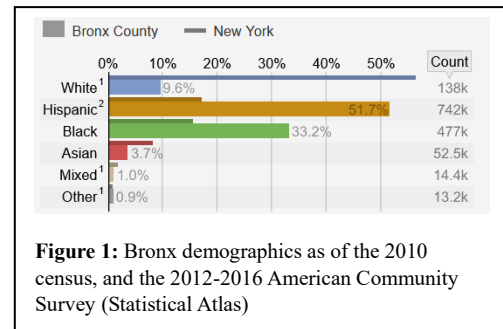


Figure 1: Bronx demographics as of the 2010 census, and the 2012-2016 American Community Survey (Statistical Atlas)

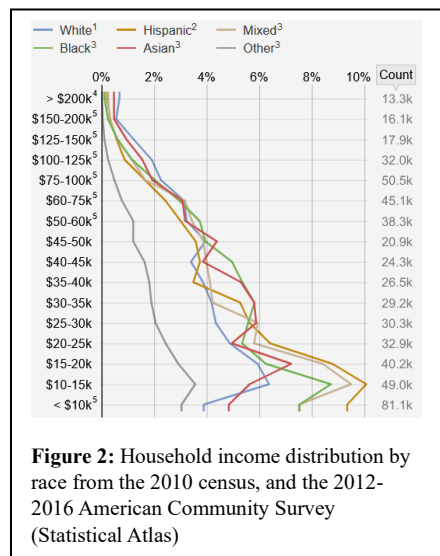


Figure 2: Household income distribution by race from the 2010 census, and the 2012-2016 American Community Survey (Statistical Atlas)

The Bronx became relevant in New York City at the turn of the century as the subway connected the Bronx to Manhattan. This allowed immigrants to emigrate to the Bronx. The first influx of immigrants consisted mainly white ethnicities such as Irish, Jewish, and Italians (Urban Areas). As industrialization continued, accessible transit and jobs brought the population of the Bronx from 201,000 to 1,265,000 between 1900 and 1930 (Urban Areas). The Bronx quickly became an affluent area of the city with the construction of many public amenities, such as: new restaurants, grocery stores, hardware stores, department stores, theatres, and Yankee Stadium (Urban Areas). Thus, the Bronx was a nice neighborhood to live in for the middle-class whites that lived there.

However, by the late prohibition era, organized crime began to propagate in the Bronx which signaled the beginning of the borough's decline (Urban Areas). In the phenomena of white flight which saw massive populations of white middle class families from the city to the suburbs, there was a gradual decrease in white populations from 1930 to 1960 (Urban Areas). By 1960, the

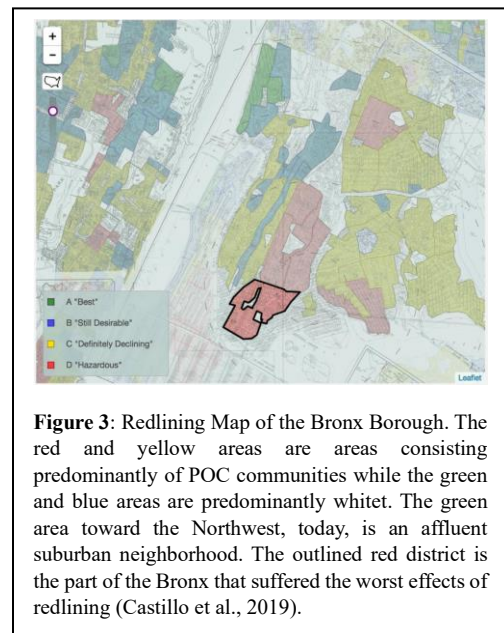
prominent population was replaced by African American and Hispanic communities (Urban Areas). Notably, as the white population fled the Bronx, we see a directly proportional trend in crime and gang violence in which the Bronx is known for today. In America today, racism and stereotypes are utilized to justify this crime boom as an issue unique to the culture of these POC communities. However, these problems are correlated with the flight of white populations and can be explained by problems in institutional racism. Many edicts were implemented in the Bronx to disenfranchise POC communities and put them in a cycle of poverty. Thus, to this day, the Bronx continues to fail in quality of life and continues to decline.

### Redlining and the Exclusion of POC Communities in the Bronx

After the emancipation of African American slaves from the American South many of them were left with no prospects or place to turn to. During the Great Migration, an influx of African Americans emigrated to Northern industrial centers for economic opportunities. Considering this increased volume of African Americans, the policy of redlining was adopted by many cities. Redlining was when banks denied loans to POC neighborhoods to starve them economically. This was achieved by color-coding a map of the city to identify which neighborhoods were too risky to lend to (Flournoy, 2021). Despicably, white neighborhoods were colored green meaning no risk, but the POC neighborhoods were colored red to show risk (Flournoy, 2021). In the Bronx, the Home Owners Loan Corporation had a redlining map that targeted racially mixed and predominantly Black neighborhoods as too risky and denied mortgage insurance (Castillo et al., 2019).

Furthermore, redlining was extended through “Planned Shrinkage” which withdrew city services from these POC communities due to their predetermined riskiness (Castillo et al., 2019). Such services included public transit and school to drain communities of resources they needed to succeed (Castillo). These services were reappropriated to newly developed suburban districts which were populated by mostly White middle-class families (Castillo et al., 2019).

Redlining and planned shrinkage contributed to why so many POC communities are disenfranchised to this day. With neighborhoods being labeled as hazardous, no investments were put into these neighborhoods. Thus, the communities living there experienced a declining economy to disastrous extremes. For example, many landlords committed arson on their buildings to collect insurance funds because it was much more profitable in those starved communities (Castillo et al., 2019). Redlining led to a cycle of poverty in which already impoverished citizens didn’t have the opportunities they needed to pull themselves out. These conditions were exasperated by planned shrinkage. By removing funding in public services like schools and transportation, these communities had no stimulation for economic opportunity. For example, without school funding children are not receiving educational skills they require and are likely finding capital wherever



they can to survive. Unfortunately, this pointed to a career in crime, such as drug trafficking or gang violence which pervades the borough to this day. Also, removing transportation led to the alienation of the community from the larger city. Without it, one couldn't feasibly work outside their neighborhood, limiting them to their economically starved neighborhood for work. However, this was intentional. Planned shrinkage was an urban planning idea to pull services from communities labeled “dying and could not be saved” (Castillo et al., 2019). These communities were the same one affected by redlining, thus rendered POC communities to decay—all the while predominantly white suburbs received the investments pulled from these areas.

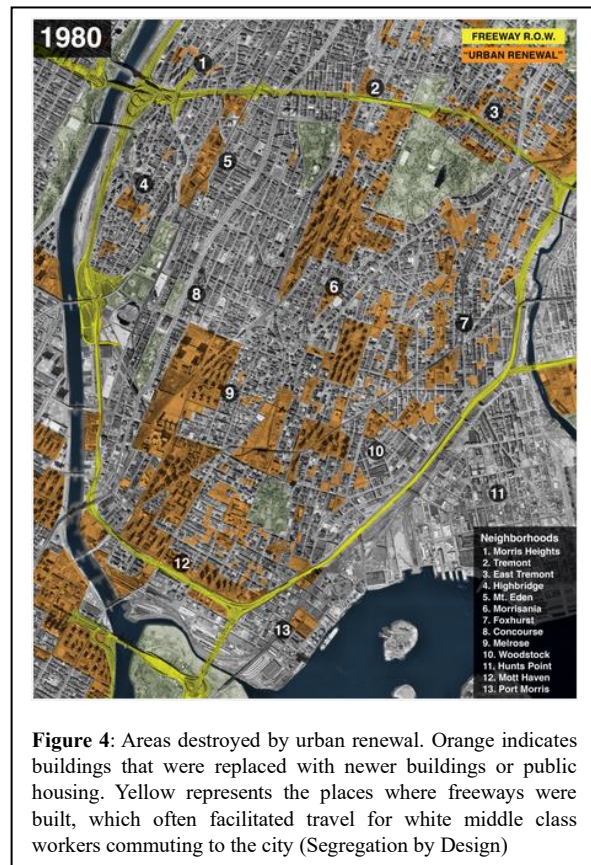
### Urban Renewal and the Destruction of Neighborhoods

New York City had multiple plans for urban expansion. Some boroughs of the city were planned with elaborate grids, while other districts were more quickly developed with quick and cheap housing. The Bronx was an example of a borough being quickly built along transit lines. In the postwar era, New York took the initiative to replace these neighborhoods in the federally funded Urban Redevelopment Program. They spent this money on replacing tenement neighborhoods with public housing and building car-centric networks to facilitate travel from the suburbs. In theory, urban renewal appeared to be a commendable initiative to revitalize parts of the city, but it often displaced citizens and destroyed the social fabric of communities within the city.

The Bronx was devastated by urban renewal. Clearing slums also displaced the residents while waiting for public housing to be created (Gonzalez, 2004). Many families were forced into the homes of friends or other families causing overcrowding (Gonzalez, 2004).

However, most of the city was destroyed without a proper number of affordable housing units being built (Teaford, 2000). In fact, the program of Urban Renewal displaced so African Americans that it was nicknamed “Negro Removal” (Teaford, 2000).

In addition, the city was demolished for the construction of freeways. These freeways created enclave neighborhoods that segregated POC from white neighborhoods (Gonzalez, 2004). Therefore, the already disenfranchised communities were separated from more affluent areas via a freeway, forcing them out of potential opportunities enjoyed by middle-class whites. Furthermore, the economic opportunities in the Bronx dwindled as the city moved away from manufacturing jobs that paid good for migrant workers (Gonzalez, 2004). Therefore, there were no well-paying jobs for the POC communities in the Bronx.



**Figure 4:** Areas destroyed by urban renewal. Orange indicates buildings that were replaced with newer buildings or public housing. Yellow represents the places where freeways were built, which often facilitated travel for white middle class workers commuting to the city (Segregation by Design)

The effects of urban renewal and the construction of freeways are related to an outbreak of crime and the phenomena of white flight (Gonzalez, 2004). Reiterating the fact that POC communities were left with not many economic opportunities and engaged in criminal activity to make ends meet. Also, the white population continued to flee, via the newly built freeways, to suburban neighborhoods which had much better amenities and services. Thus, with the lack of jobs, housing, and the destruction of once lively neighborhoods, the Bronx was plunged into a cycle of poverty and was completely devastated.

## **Conclusion**

The Bronx is an example of a once thriving borough that is now regarded as dangerous and impoverished. This is a common issue in America where many POC live in disenfranchised communities that are stuck in cycles of poverty. Thus, many negative stereotypes about POC are perpetuated, using their neighborhoods and living conditions as justification.

The reality is the issues in communities such as the Bronx were manufactured through many edicts that were made to segregate POC from white communities. In the case of Redlining the motive was to ensure that white neighborhoods would receive investments, making them grow, and disenfranchise the POC communities. Planned Shrinkage was a similar process that defunded vital services. Without these services that once benefitted the white population, POC communities couldn't receive similar economic opportunities—further disenfranchising them. Then with the initiative of urban renewal, the government haphazardly destroyed most of the Bronx which displaced thousands and did not build adequate affordable housing to replace them. Instead, large freeways were built to facilitate travel for white suburban workers and thus created walls that segregated POC neighborhoods from white neighborhoods.

The outbreak of crime, gang violence, and poverty that the Bronx is known for today is a product of these projects that failed these POC communities. The POC in the Bronx weren't given the opportunities that it once created for the White populations that lived there, and continuously disenfranchised them at every opportunity. Thus, the unfortunate issues that plague the Bronx today were not caused by the citizens of today but is clearly caused by the system that still exists today.

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